Reflexivity and tradition: a critique of the individualization thesis

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Abstract

The detraditionalization thesis relies on an account of *increased reflexivity* at an individual and institutional level to make sense of contemporary identity. This paper is intended as a critical exploration of that premise. It will discuss how, in accounts of contemporary individualised risk societies, traditional or 'pre-modern' selves are conceived of as relatively non-reflexive, individuality limited by long-established religious cosmologies and social orders into which specific existences neatly slot. The paper will argue that this is not an accurate representation. It will draw on research and analysis from a number of disciplines to sketch an alternative picture of 'traditional' identity, one in which *reflexivity plays a more constitutional role*. Subsequently, it will be claimed that current theorisations of identity drawing on the individualisation thesis rely on a systematic *simplification* and misrepresentation of 'traditional' identity. It will be argued that combined with existing critiques of the *exaggerated* role of reflexivity in contemporary accounts, the reassessment of traditional identity could offer the basis for a powerful corrective to the conceptual foundations of the individualisation thesis.

Reflexivity and tradition: a critique of the individualization thesis

Our own mythology consists in imagining ourselves as radically different, even before searching out small differences and small divides

Bruno Latour

The Detraditionalization Thesis

This article is an attempt to critique an analytical tendency in accounting for the impact of supposedly radical social changes upon self-identity. According to the detraditionalization thesis (Heelas *et al*. 1996), these changes, variously imagined, come together to forge a self marked by a heightened, transforming level of reflexivity. The meta-theoretical approaches of Beck (1992, 2002) and Giddens (1991, 1992, 1994) are the most established representatives of this claim, though similar views of modern society are apparent in Castell's 'network society' (1996), Bauman's 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) some versions of post-modernity (Gergen, 1991), and in sociology more generally[1]. It is argued that today, for the first time, individuals are released from rigid, prescribed social positions such as gender roles and *have to* construct their own biographies reflexively; we have been 'colonized by reflexivity' as Zizek puts it (1999: 336). In the words of Ulrich Beck: 'Individualization of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become self-reflexive; socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced' (Beck, 1992: 135). Even modernity was reliant on tradition for its perpetuation for the bulk of its historical development:

> For most of its history, modernity has rebuilt tradition as it has
> dissolved it.... For tradition placed in stasis some core aspects
> of social life - not least the family and sexual identity - which
> were left largely untouched so far as 'radicalizing'
> Enlightenment was concerned (Giddens, 1994: 56).

Or in Bauman's words, traditional societies 'determined identity by birth and hence provided few if any occasions for the questions of 'who am I?' to arise' (Bauman, 2004: 49). The 'traditions' of modernity provided relatively stable guidelines for social interaction and options for identity formation, as traditions had done in previous epochs.

For all these perspectives, the importance of traditions in underpinning an ordered social reality and consequently reasonably ascribed and secure identities has been disappearing since the mid-to-late twentieth century, if it has not already dissolved. In contrast, traditional communities provided a stable, if restrictive, environment for the development of identity. The largely unquestioned normative content of traditional beliefs and rituals combine with the chronic localisation of most people's experience. Relationships were bound together in local orderings of time and place, which in turn prescribed the boundaries of identity. Giddens stresses 'the importance of *localised relations* organised in terms of *place*' (1991: 101; emphasis in the original). Gergen neatly summarises the subsequent relationship between tradition and identity in traditional society:

> In the traditional community, where relationships were reliable, continuous, and face-to-face, a firm sense of self was favoured. One's sense of identity was broadly and continuously supported. Further there was strong agreement on patterns of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour. One could simply.... be, for there was little question of being otherwise (Gergen, 1991: 147).

The institutions of modernity have continued to expand and envelop the modern world, but it is only in our more immediate history that the patterns of modernity have facilitated radical social change facilitating a radical qualitative break from a social and personal reliance on tradition. The details of social change are variously imagined and will not be explored here. They reflect changes more broadly discussed and debated in social theory, such as globalisation, time-space compression, post-industrialism and computer-mediated communication. Taken together they are utilised to explain a widespread process of *detraditionalization*, the establishment of post-traditional societies and reflexive self-identities.

Critical Reception

Critical social theory has engaged with a critique of notion of detraditionalization in some detail already, in terms of its portrayal of the particular qualities of the contemporary detraditionalized society at its core (e.g. Heelas *et al.*, 1996; O'Brien *et al.*, 1999). There are three key aspects to criticisms of the detraditionalization thesis in terms of identity. The first refers to how the thrust of claims of detraditionalization and heightened reflexivity obscure the myriad ways in which the dimensions of one's specific identity are still formed, in part, by powerful forces of social division, hierarchy and regulation and in doing so parallel neo-liberal discourses which individualise the causation behind all life-trajectories (e.g. Craib, 1991; Cremin, 2003; Hay *et al.*, 1997; Jamieson, 1998; O'Brien, 1999).

The second considers how ideas about analytical transcendence and progressive self-transparency are an un-reflexive hangover from an age of naive modernism; by assuming that we have transcended all cultural myths, unmasked all meta-narratives standing between perception and reality 'as it is', and thus failing to notice that such a claim is in fact a particular narrative of modernity (Adams, 2003; Alexander, 1996; Latour, 1993; Mestrovic, 1999). The third explores how other stories co-exist with those which eschew tradition and celebrate reflexivity in contemporary narratives of self-identity, how traditions survive 'beside, behind, between or beneath the practices and structures' of post-traditional society (Luke, 1996: 112). Many other meta-narratives still weave themselves into the fabric of lived self-identities, with varying degrees of compulsion and reflexive penetration, in areas as diverse as class, gender, race, age, magic and fate (Adkins, 1999; Mitchell and Green, 2002; Jamieson, 1998; Skeggs, 2002). Thus reflexivity does not operate upon subjectivity in a realm of pure choice and freedom, but is unavoidably grounded in the authority and compulsion of traditions and quasi-traditions (Heelas, 1996).

These critiques of the detraditionalization thesis are all well-established, and will not be rehearsed in any detail here. However the other side of the binary at the heart of the detraditionalization thesis is equally problematic but relatively neglected; that is, its view of *traditional* society against which post-traditional society is contrasted.

Just as the portrayal of selfhood in contemporary society seemed excessively fluid, free, exposed and apolitical, so the picture of 'traditional' selves seems remarkably static, closed and tidy. This is an important point because it might contribute substantially to a critique of the detraditionalization thesis, but also because such a view of tradition prevails in sociological and psychological accounts more generally, which amounts to a 'sweeping rhetorical rehearsal of a conventional script' (Luke, 1996: 113).

Luke's concern is rare in mainstream sociological accounts and their critical reception, with some notable exceptions (Benton, 1999; Bradley, 1996; Green, 2003; Heelas, 1996; Pahl; 1995). Even here, acknowledgements of 'tradition' as problematic in terms of the theorisation of identity are disparate, mutually unaware, often tucked away in accounts concerned with other themes, and certainly not shipped over in a persuasive manner to confront the detraditionalization thesis. This paper is an attempt to question the sociological understanding of the 'tradition' side of the traditional/post-traditional binary in more detail.

One of the most sustained inquiries into detraditionalization is Heelas *et al's* (1996). One can imagine then that it holds some promise for shedding critical light on the sociological view of 'traditional societies'. Much of the book deals with the themes already mentioned, either defending the idea of a post-traditional society or asking critical questions about the coexistence of tradition and detraditionalization and self-reflexivity or asserting the cultural embeddedness of reflexivity. For our stated purposes however, the most pertinent question is raised in the introduction: 'is it really reasonable to suppose that traditional societies can swallow up the person to the extent of muting or denying autonomous voices?' (Heelas, 1996: 7). By extension, we could ask if it seems reasonable to imagine that traditional society could deny and contain self-reflexive expression as comprehensively as the detraditionalization thesis would have it. In fact, Heelas sets the parameters of our debate with clarity worth citing: 'the best way to criticize the (radical) loss-of-tradition thesis is to argue that 'the traditional' (serving to gauge what has been lost) is not as tradition-dominated as might be supposed' (Heelas, 1996: 7)

Although Heelas *et al* tackle the traditions of today as complex aspects of social reality, and by extension, identity, it is that 'today' which is always in focus. As Heelas acknowledges, 'concentrating as it does on the contemporary world' the volume does not make room for critical claims about detraditionalization, even less processes of self-reflexivity, 'as they bear on 'traditional' or 'pre-modern' settings (Heelas, 1996: 8). Thus, support and evidence must be sought elsewhere for our fledgling critique.

To extend Heelas's suggestions, it might be argued that 'traditions', as contexts for situating self in meaningful existential and social contexts, interrelated with reflexivity just as it has been argued they do today. Indeed it could be claimed that 'traditions' as embodied in activities such as social roles, communal rituals, intimate relationships and self-understandings are never simply 'given' but always negotiated and reworked by different groups and successive groups. The implication here is 'that processes of tradition maintenance, like processes of modernization, are *reflexive'* (Green, 2003: 3-4; emphasis in original). Their transmission has never been a simple process of absorption, but always an embodied, reflexive endeavour (Mellor and

Shilling, 1997: 90-93). But what historical evidence is there for a more dynamic view of reflexivity in 'traditional' societies?

Pahl suggests that 'for those misguidedly imagining that the late twentieth century is a time of striking contrast with 'tradition', more understanding of the strains and social tensions of previous times would seem to be necessary' (1995: 165); though few emphasising detraditionalization have actually delved into historical records, even cursorily. History is an enormous subject of course, and finding relevant accounts of the experience of subjectivity, reflexivity and selfhood which might suggest equivalent levels of complexity to modern times is a daunting feat. In any great detail it is beyond the means of this paper. However we do have a number of leads, in the pockets of social theory already mentioned, and there is a substantial, if neglected, body of historical study which problematises established views of 'tradition' (e.g. Aers, 1988; Bolton, 1980; Larner, 1982; Thomas, 1973). The remainder of the article will consider evidence in support of, a critique of the traditional/post-traditional binary upon which the detraditionalization/extended reflexivity thesis rests.

The Victorians

Our first step is into the not too distant past of early Victorian European society. It is a common cliché to imagine the Victorian self as bound by strict civil codes, obsessed with manners, hierarchy and social position, whilst in thrall to scientific rationalism, Reason, and the repressive caricature of selfhood all these factors combined to encourage. Accounts of post-traditional theorists may not be so coarse in their portrayal, but as has been suggested already, its advocates rarely consider any historical period in enough detail to produce meaningful portraits of experience, stereotyped or otherwise. Victorians may not be envisaged as embedded in the religious and feudal cosmologies of old, but they are certainly imagined as enmeshed in the 'traditions' and myths thrown up by the industrial-scientific-secular complex of a modernity charged by Enlightenment principles. Thus in modernity, as in earlier 'traditional societies', 'there was little if any doubt as to the shape of life needing to be lived' (Bauman, 2004: 49).

To find support for such a claim, or indeed the alternative outlined here, we need to get closer to how Victorian society was experienced by the full spectrum of its members. We have acknowledged the difficulties in this pursuit, but at least one historian has drawn on an impressive range of accounts, including many first-hand ones – 'letters and diaries, history, sermons, and social criticism, as well as poetry and fiction' - in attempt to convey what he calls 'the Victorian frame of mind' (Houghton, 1957: xv). These sources lead the author to a very different interpretation of Victorian society which raises serious questions about the traditional/post-traditional binary and the perspective it underpins.

Houghton found that the mid-eighteenth-century was experienced as a period of transition, speed, anxiety, and above all, a pervasive and unsettling doubt 'about the nature of man [sic], society and the universe' (1957: 23). Changes in the speed of society engendered by new forms of technology were making communication, travel and work potentially more fast-paced affairs. The railroad and the steamship made everything happen quicker, and the contrast between the brave new Victorian era and the reliance on the sailing ship and horse-power which had been in place for centuries

is argued to have posed a bigger leap in technological advancement to any we have seen in the twentieth century, in terms of both the size of the contrast and its 'startling novelty' (Houghton, 1957: 7). Similar claims have been made about the spread of the electric telegraph in the same period, the impact it had on our experience of time-space, and the grand promises made about its liberatory potential (Mackay, 2002; Standage, 1998; Thrift, 1990).

It was also a period of transition in that religious world-views were giving way to competing humanist and scientific philosophies. However the latter were not accepted with open arms as comfortable truths by all, but, during this period at least, subjected to scrutiny and uncertainty. Hence Victorians found themselves caught between conflicting worlds in their attempts to make sense of themselves and their reality: 'As one prophet after another stepped forward with his program of reconstruction, the hubbub of contending theories advanced, and echoing through lectures, sermons, and periodicals as well as books, created a climate of opinion in which, quite apart from any specific doubts, the habit of doubt was unconsciously bred' (1957: 12).

As Houghton suggests, the result of this cacophony engenders pervasive doubt, where 'all truths seem relevant only to a particular moment' (1957: 15). Such doubt is, for post-traditional theorists, the particular calling card of post-traditional society, where for the first time 'everything is open to doubt' (Giddens, 1994: 86), but which Houghton here associates with Victorian society. Houghton's sources are constantly decrying the 'break up of traditional and conventional notions respecting our life' (Stowell cited in Houghton, 1957: 9); that the systemic approaches to life provided by tradition are 'breaking up under them like ice in a thaw' (Kingsley cited in Houghton, 1957: 112); another speaks of the disinheritance of tradition and religion leaving him as if standing 'on a cliff which is crumbling beneath one, and falling piecemeal into the dark sea' (Symonds cited in Houghton, 1957: 66); for yet another, those who clung to any faith must 'look about them in constant apprehension, misgiving, and wonder, with the hurried uneasy mien of people living amid earthquakes… all is doubt, hesitation and shivering expectancy' (Morley, cited in Houghton, 1957: 66-7). Compare to Gidden's claim concerning post-traditional society: 'Science, Popper says, is built upon shifting sand; it has no stable grounding at all. Yet today it is....more or less the whole of everyday life to which this metaphor applies' (1994: 87).

Respectability, often thought to be a pillar of faith in Victorian society, is also argued to be a reflexive, anxiety-ridden construction, in which self-awareness is centrally implicated. Achieving respectability, however defined along class or gender lines, may not have been as simple as a mere following of tracks in unambiguous fashion, as Bauman suggests. Houghton describes the presentation of a respectable self as a 'struggle for existence' marked by 'toiling and scheming', dread, exposures and worries which affected the whole of the community (1957: 60-1). Reflexive awareness of this self-construction is clear in one writer's comment that each lives 'in constant fear of every chance disclosure which may throw down his hardly-erected edifice of respectability like a house of cards' (Cobbe, cited in Houghton, 1957: 61).

In poetry, letters and articles Houghton delivers numerous examples of piercing reflexivity which cut through not just the veneer of respectability but what some

contemporary scholarship has often considered to be the unconsciously accepted context of Victorian sensibilities, (e.g. 1957: 22; 65). Consider, for example, the autobiographical comments of Frederick Roberston, published in 1865:

> It is an awful moment when the soul begins to find that the props on which it has blindly rested so long are, many of them, rotten, and begins to suspect them all; when it begins to feel the nothingness of traditionary opinions which have been received with implicit confidence, and in that horrible insecurity begins also to doubt whether there be anything to believe at all (Robertson, cited in Houghton, 1957: 73)

If 'self' replaces 'soul' (which may not be an insignificant difference), Roberston's monologue could be mistaken for that of a devout post-traditionalist.

The Victorian era is thus considered by Houghton to be a time when science, religion, commerce, community and individualism all clashed and forged doubt and reflexivity at the level of self-awareness. The widespread nature of doubt and anxiety and its application to self-awareness suggests it was much more than the initial sparks of post-traditional society. The promise of science to wipe away ignorance was probed and questioned even as its secular authority ascended; this was no ossified repertoire of newly accepted myths and traditions. Thus we find some support for our contention that just as post-traditional society relies on myth and culture to make sense of self and social reality alongside reflexivity, so previous societies had their fair share of reflexivity and doubt to problematise tradition; 'continuity rather than contrast is the conclusion to be drawn from comparing to the Victorians to ourselves' (1957: 13).

That spirit does not extend to 'traditional societies' of pre-Victorian times however. Houghton depicts such societies in almost exactly the same way as the post-traditional thesis does everything that came before it:

> So long as one lives within an accepted structure of belief and value, he [sic] follows customary lines without raising fundamental questions, and human energy flows unimpeded into activity. By and large that way of life still obtained in England until the commencement of the Victorian period (Houghton, 1957: 71).

Some historical accounts of earlier periods disagree, and it is contended here that accounts of earlier periods problematise the traditional/post-traditional binary yet further.

A Seventeenth-Century Healer

One account of particular interest is Macdonald's study of seventeenth century England (Macdonald, 1981). He unearths a fascinating historical source: the voluminous case notes of Richard Napier, a seventeenth-century 'astrological physician'. The notes are made up of Napier's descriptions of his impressions of over two thousand clients who visited him with various physical and mental ailments, only a small proportion of the sixty thousand thought to have visited him during his years of practice (1981: 26). His reputation as a healer was thus well known, and he was thought of as a 'magi', combining magic, science and religion in a persuasive diagnostic and curative mix. His detailed accounts of each client allow Macdonald

access to how such a heady collision of discourses was 'integrated into the mental world and social lives of ordinary people' (1981: 12).

What is the relevance of the grasp of the anxieties of seventeenth-century 'ordinary people' to the argument being put forward here? Macdonald suggests that:

> If we can make out the most familiar sources of anxiety and gloom these
> ordinary men and women complained about, then we shall be able to
> glimpse an image of the satisfactions they experienced and to explore a part
> of the emotional lives of those whose thoughts are normally obscured by the
> darkness of illiteracy (1981: 73).

Requests for help from an esteemed practitioner might signify smaller frays in the seams of everyday life, thus revealing more clearly the *expected* contours of the latter, as they are expressed by laypeople. A second answer is that here we are reminded again of the claims made by Giddens and others that profound anxiety over one's self suggesting a heightened awareness of one's self *as a* self, such as over status, personal morality, mortality are peculiar to the post-traditional, reflexive age. Further intimations of such anxieties in 'traditional' societies add weight to a critical reappraisal of the traditional / post-traditional binary and the subjectivities which mark them.

What troubled Napier's clients? The most 'commonplace misfortunes' were conflicts within families, particularly husband and wife, and between lovers. The 'frustrations of courtship and married life' alone accounted for forty percent of the 'anxieties and dilemmas' of Napier's clients (1981: 73-5). This fact in itself seems to jar a little with the portrayal of 'traditional' family life assumed by the detraditionalization thesis and in sociology more generally. 'Family' is commonly seen to be a container for the broader traditions of extended kinship ties and the religious cosmologies of the time. Real, existing, traditional people around at the time are viewed as little more than pawns in the playing out of traditions via the various conduits of family, household and community.

According to the detraditionalization thesis, it is only in contemporary conditions that people have come to be fully reflexive about their role in intimate relationships. Increasingly isolated from broader social networks of contact and meaning, intimate partners and the nuclear family become invested with the expectations of personal fulfilment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). In states of heightened reflexivity, relationships become ends in themselves, initiated and terminated depending on how they meet the individualised needs of its participants: 'a more or less regulated exchange of emotional comfort, which is always cancellable' (Beck, 1992: 89). Abstracted intimacy, operating on its own terms, and free from the load of cultural expectations, amounts to what Giddens terms the 'pure relationship' (Giddens, 1992). Of course marriage relationships were harder to formally escape in the seventeenth-century, were highly patriarchal, and could not be entered and exited as fluidly as they supposedly are to day[2]. Even so, Macdonald paints a very different picture of 'traditional' family and married life to that normally contrasted with 'post-traditional'.

Parental authority was still officially the legitimate authority in seventeenth-century England, reiterated in the sermons, books of conduct and pamphlets of the time

(Macdonald, 1981: 92), and arranged marriages were still common. Thus many of Napier's visitors were afflicted by the 'frustrated passions' arising from being forbidden to marry to their chosen loves (1981: 94). However, Macdonald claims that the practice was 'being eroded by new ideals and by increased geographical mobility' (1981: 93). These ideals revolved around the desirability of companionship, and they impacted upon those already married. Newly granted freedoms generated expectations, and consequently anxieties, with which Napier was confronted by so many of his clients. The young unmarried had to negotiate between the contradictory tradition of parental despotism and the new-found liberalisation of courtship and encouragement of initiative, whilst the married could now consider their meagre lot against a backdrop of raised hopes.

These changes were accompanied by a gradual shrinking of households and a partial attenuation of the links between immediate family and outside connections. Macdonald argues that as a consequence, 'mobile and compact, the nuclear family made husbands and wives, parents and children dependent chiefly upon each other for emotional satisfaction' (1981: 98). There was more invested in these relationships as a result, mirrored in the psychological peril marital problems posed for many of Napier's clients (1981: 99), and in the expressions of grief they brought to him in the case of the death of a spouse or child (1981: 103)[3]. Despite the patriarchal nature of village and family life, the changing context of intimacy, encouraged by some of the popular religious writing of the time, generated a different kind of reflexivity about what was gained emotionally by being in a relationship. These in turn created the frustrations and anxieties of Napier's clients: 'most wives among his clients desired and expected close and affectionate ties with their husbands' (1981: 104). Both husband and wife perceived that their emotional needs should be met in their relationship with the other (1981: 105).

Compare the structures of feeling invoked by Napier's clients to those by the entrenched views of mainstream sociology and history, encapsulated here: 'popular marriage in former centuries was usually affectionless, held together by considerations of property and lineage… It would never have occurred to them to ask if they were happy' (Shorter, 1976: 55). MacDonald's account of family life has a remarkable affinity to those of Giddens, Beck and others, suggesting a reflexive approach towards the 'traditions' of marriage and family life reflecting competing discourses. However, the indicators and propellants of self-reflexivity and detraditionalization they locate in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are here uncovered in the sixteenth.

How did Napier and his clients make sense of their troubles in relationships and more generally? If we were to accept the traditional/post-traditional binary we might imagine that sense would be made with fairly inflexible reference to the fusion of religious and feudal cosmologies of the time. However, Macdonald suggests a bewildering array of discourses competed for attention in the villages of sixteenth century England. They included 'angelic magic, astrology, alchemy, and Christian Neo-platonism' in 'a synthesis of magic, science and religion' (1981: 17). On a broader social stage these were increasingly antagonistic forces in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the conflicts between religious factions and ascending scientific and knowledge created a complex blend of discursive authority. Uncertainty was heightened by the rapid geographical mobility engendered by

economic changes and enclosure, creating large transient populations (1981: 61). Many ways to make sense of reality meant that 'the means to combat every kind of malign effect were dispensed by a bewildering array of healers' (1981: 7). 'Frustrated passions', overwhelming grief and love-sickness may have been understood as divine retribution or demonic possession, but 'witchcraft, astrological influences [and] humoral imbalances', and any combination of these forces, was equally likely: 'The result was an untidy congeries of values and injunctions, which were often contradictory' (1981: 79).

A layperson's 'choice' of healer may not have amounted to a reflexive engagement with their anxieties and ailments using the full range of discourses mentioned here. However the emphasis they placed upon immediate family life, their subsequent emotional investments and anxieties, and the variety of discourses available to underpin their personal expectations and meaningfully order their anxieties suggests many parallels between 'traditional society' and our own. Intelligent individuals worked reflexively with these discourses to make sense of self-experience in a variety of contexts – healthy and anxious, husband and wife, accused and fearful. Thus sixteenth century ailments allow us to restate our central claim, expressed eloquently here by Luke:

> Reflexive, unstable, pluralistic and unclosed possibilities in traditions continually confronted every human being as he or she became engaged in cycling through the contemporary times of his or her lifespan. Choice always existed, and choices required selecting the correct traditions and aptly adapting to these circumstances in practicing complex games of elaborate cultural reflexivity (Luke, 1996: 123-4).

Witchcraft

Steven Russell's genealogy of witchcraft trials takes us a step further back in time to sixteenth-century Europe; a time when perhaps we might more readily imagine the stranglehold of tradition over subjectivity (Russell, 2001). His Foucauldian approach to identity also allows us to build a more complex and partial picture of reflexivity in relation to tradition akin to the version critically upheld in relation to contemporary society. Russell's initial claim is that 'traditional scholarly assumptions about the unsophisticated nature of early modern European mentalities result in inadequate representations of accused witches' (2001: 121). Modern scholarship has tended to treat accounts of witchcraft in surviving documentation superficially, too keen to see the detail as evidence of the powerful grip of cosmologies of superstition rather than explore the subjectivities being negotiated. As a result witches 'too often appear as flat, wooden, one-dimensional, less than fully human, almost entirely devoid of intelligence, personality, humanity, creativity and power, hapless and helpless victims of relentless and overwhelming structures of power and ideology' (2001: 122). The exact same could be said of the assumptions made about 'traditional' peoples in the detraditionalization thesis.

Russell's genealogical approach, concerned as it is with the microclimate of struggles, negotiations and conflicts which make and remake subjectivities via an embodied, reflexive agency, suggests a different interpretation of the witch trial documentation akin to the arguments being put forward here. It provides us with 'glimpses of human beings struggling in diverse ways to negotiate their complex entanglements with

intricate networks of power and belief' (2001: 121). Russell focuses in on a representative case: the trial and eventual confession of an unnamed forty-year old woman in the town of Eichstätt. The details of the trial are harrowing, the accused involved in attempts at suicide and trying to remove her tongue to avoid 'confession' and stripped, flogged, stretched, interrogated, contemptuously ignored and dismissed (Russell, 2001: 129-35; Robbins, 1959: 148-56).

Conjuring an image of a helpless victim of patriarchal, rationalistic authority is easy to do, but Russell sees something more complex at work. Even in this situation of apparent powerlessness, the accused is involved in drawing and redrawing here identity position. We have no way of knowing if her own sense of self is genuinely absorbed in, or kept back from, the documented discourse. Either way, the process of socially positioning the dimensions of her identity was not simply one of ascription by the most powerful: 'Positions on, and interpretations of, identity, reality, religion, power, the limits of possibility and the nature of truth were tested and contested, temporarily abandoned and later reasserted in a different context' (Russell, 2001: 129).

Amidst all this activity Russell gives a clear sense that the accused is involved in a partially 'reflexive project of selfhood'; she is aware of her own self-presentation and is constructing various versions of her self in dialogue with her interrogators, not simply filling out an imposed role. It is not a free-floating reflexivity, but one which explores possibilities in relation to cultural norms; thus she variously asserts her role as wife and mother, her Christian values, her demonism, and her distance from the latter, at various points in her testimony and 'confession'. Just as the co-existence critique stresses the persistence of 'traditions' and cultural contexts in contemporary self-reflexivity, we would imagine that reflexivity exists in dialogue with the available cultural frameworks of the time.

Thus at the beginning of the trial she is 'secure in her identity' and states that she is 'merely a Christian wife and mother, too poor to have the resources necessary to indulge in any extravagant evil' (Russell, 2001: 130). As the accusations continue despite such assertions, she asserts more prominently her Christian identity – her knowledge of Christ's suffering, of Christian morality; when the judges negate such assertions in their 'rational' interrogation she reconfigures her Christian self, acknowledging temptation, visions and repentance, or asserts a more taciturn or cynical grasp of proceedings. Thus the accused 'returns to the matter of her Christian identity at different points in the trial, variously asserting it, modifying it, or retreating from it when it is working against her' (2001:131).

After prolonged torture and interrogation the woman finally 'confesses' to a range of witch-related crimes, including child-killing, intercourse with the devil, grave robbing and flying on a pitch fork, though again she later retreats from this position and reasserts her Christian identity stating that her devotion will not allow her to 'continue these lies' (2001: 135). The temporary submission and its denunciation is again understood as part of a self-reflexive process, indicative of 'a highly intelligent person struggling desperately to find her way through a baffling maze of legal and theological problems as they intersect with all-too-personal realities of power and pain' (2001: 135); one 'who has taken stock of her situation accurately in this absurd game of truth and power into which she has been thrust' (2001: 130).

Perhaps controversially, Russell suggests that there is power and pleasure to be had in the moment of submitting to the demands for confession within witch trials more generally. Pleasure may derive from finally embodying the codes of femininity one has resisted, constructing lurid tales which shock, excite and confirm the expectations of the judges and the community and grant one a temporary status of fixity and recognition, even if the end result is horrific execution[4]. Both within and outside the trials, Russell argues that in utilising power in their environment as best they could, being a 'witch' may also have been a reflexive move for some women, signifying resistance and defiance of the dominant order, belonging, and the feared capacity to name others (the Eichstätt woman named forty-five accomplices before she died).

Russell is suggesting that the pronouncements of the accused cannot be reduced to a simple ventriloquism of the theology of the time, there is evidence of reflexivity, but as with reflexivity in all ages, it actively interacts with the dominant meta-narratives of the time. He utilises Foucault's genealogical approach to reveal the complex subjectivities constituted in defending one's self against accusations of witchcraft. They reveal not a 'pure' reflexivity, but one which draws selectively and creatively from available and acceptable discourses, as indicated by Luke. By arguing that reflexivity may have existed on a similar plane but in relation to very different cultural discourses in the past, we are arguing for a sense of continuity in our understanding of agency, and against the reification of 'tradition'. A genealogy of witchcraft is thus one example of the evidence necessary 'to suggest that perceptive individuals of all levels of society questioned, resisted and resented the limitations of established and conventional scripts in local communities of place and occupation' (Pahl, 1996: 119). There are yet further examples from different circumstances and eras.

Going Back Further

The sixteenth century is not the earliest historical juncture at which the detraditionalized thesis can be problematised[5]. Aers's study of fourteenth-century literature provides more fascinating examples of a people shaped by, and shaping a culture of heterogeneity, uncertainty and anxiety' where their self-identities were far from settled (Aers, 1988). He argues that the period was one of social conflict and tension, underpinned by market economies and class antagonisms which generated mobility and individualism itself shot through with ambivalence and uncongenial to any sense of static 'tradition' (1988: 16). Aers draws on texts produced by, and reflecting upon, the whole range of social classes existent in late medieval society, to present a time marked by 'diversity of perspectives, concerns and imagined communities' in which 'individual identity often becomes an anxious topic for reflections, often intractable ones' (1988: 17). The poem *Piers Plowman* is analysed and its detail reveals a concern with poverty, productivity, vagrants, charity, choice and free-will, labourers, and labour conflict which stretches well beyond the confines of theology and comfortable cultural scripts. Amidst the anxious discussion of all these themes, there is the 'self-projection' of the author, at various points 'vagrant, immensely mobile, poet, dreamer, minor cleric, figure of Will' (1988: 71). The negotiation of such projections in the communities portrayed emphasises, for Aers, 'the lack of fraternal bonds and the lack of a traditional community in which the 'I'

would have a stable place in a stable web of relationships' which indicates 'disturbing individual symptoms of social dislocations and changes (1998: 71).

The diaries of Margery Kempe 'visionary' and 'mystic' similarly portray and individual actively trying to make sense of the contrasting and conflicting requirements placed on gendered identity in fourteenth-century England. Kempe's social and psychological milieu appear to be both constituted and fragmented by inconsistent religious mentalities and powerful 'priestly judgements'(1998: 85), the demands of a market economy, her community, her family, her husband, and her own visions and instincts. The torments she discloses 'are not presented simply as external impositions on an integrated, homogenous self but the guilty product of her own struggles for an identity which would enable a relative autonomy in relation to priest, husband and others' (1998: 85). Such a modern-sounding struggle creates further torment in terms of the individual isolation it produces both from members of her community and elements of her own self. However, as she embraces magic, mysticism and her visions alongside Catholic mythology, her 'conflict-ridden identity could find a supportive context in her heterogeneous community (1998: 116).

Aers goes on to discuss how masculine identities were reflexively formed in the context of courtly communities (1988: 117-52). Mellor and Shilling similarly stress the importance of 'court society cultures' in facilitating a reflexive distancing from one's own self-presentation and self-identifications, drawing on discourses beyond accepted religious doctrine. The detailed distinctions of manners, deportment and speech which accompanied the rise of the courtly community from as early as the twelfth century, 'involved learning ways of seeing, dressing, interpreting, and ultimately experiencing the body which could not be contained entirely within the parameters of Church culture' (Mellor and Shilling, 1997: 91). Such codes of behaviour have of course been well documented by Elias and there is not the space to index them here. Our main concern is that for Mellor and Shilling they are another indication of a distancing from 'traditional' prescriptions for behaviour, encouraged self-reflexivity and individual mobility and by the later Middle Ages exerted an influence in wider society (Mellor and Shilling, 1997: 91-3). The harmonious fit between self and society post-traditionalist apply to their predecessors is again unsettled.

Even earlier historical periods could be ripe for similar exploration and reinterpretation. For example, evidence for the existence of reflexivity is apparent in the encouragement of self-contemplation in some religious movements. Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, Christianity, aboriginal, Hopi and Innuit culture all contain within their doctrines some sects or paths which encourage or demand remarkable levels of self-reflexivity, adhering to a fundamental assumption that the human being 'is the matter of the universe, contemplating itself' (Sagan, cited in Matthiessen, 1998 [1978]: 67). An established definition of Zen Buddhism, for example, states its principles thus: 'Outside teaching, *apart from tradition*. Not founded on words and letters. Pointing directly to the human mind' (emphasis added). This is not the place to judge the efficacy of religious tradition in facilitating reflexive awareness and transcending the habits and mindsets of tradition. What is important is that rituals facilitating individualised reflexivity *within* at least some of these cosmologies have existed for centuries, continue to this day, and take us even further back in history than the main body of this discussion has allowed. The process may not parallel the

cognitive, active, ego-oriented reflexivity portrayed by Giddens *et al* but it surely reflects both an engagement with, and a reflexive distancing from, traditional structures of thought and feeling (Mouzelis, 1996). In this context the claim that only post-traditional people reflect upon them selves without obstacle appears ridiculously naïve, arrogant even.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this discussion has problematised the 'tradition' side of the simplistic binary which underpins accounts of detraditionalization and post-traditional society. 'Traditional societies', far from being the static, enclosed worlds smoothly incorporating, containing and shaping the subjectivities that were found in them, are claimed to be complex constellations. The examples considered suggest that social structure, norms and morality, here revolving around magic, science and religion, and the expectations they placed on individuals, has never been a settled affair into which individuals are slotted, generation after generation. Every where we look there are signs of inconsistency, struggle and uncertainty at the level of subjective experience as best as we can measure it.

When it is considered who enacts, reproduces, embodies and embeds the rules and conventions which animate traditions, we can agree with Luke that 'in the final analysis, it would appear to be reflexive subjects: or people, who make, break, follow, depart from conventional rules in living their socially interconnected existences' (1996: 111). It is not being proposed that individuals had a free-floating subjectivity in the past, with which they reflexively constructed their medieval, Victorian or modern identities. It has been argued extensively that such a scenario is not possible in 'post-traditional' society either. It *is* claimed that subjectivity exists in an ambivalent, reflexive relationship to the traditions, myths, rituals, routines and other subtle demands of socio-cultural structures both then and now.

The reification of 'traditional society' lends false credence to a view of identity in the past as conforming and confirming, determined and complacent. It overlooks the historical struggles over what we now call 'identity', and vastly over-simplifies the ambivalent nature of the struggle for identity in the complex, socially divided societies of the past and today, 'in which human beings contend in complex ways the with powers that seek to subjugate themselves and their knowledge' (Russell, 2001: 135). The conflict and struggle involved in becoming and maintaining a situated subject, as well as passivity and habit, is a continuous thread running through our social history. Aers is surely correct in asserting that 'If, as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse maintained, 'All reification is forgetting', these traditions demand a remembering, a resistance to that amnesia which is organized around the dominant ideology in both past and present' (Aers, 1988: 18). In restoring the complex voices of the past, it is hoped that a clearer picture is provided of the present.

The assumptions the detraditionalization thesis make about 'traditional societies' are a dangerously simplistic. Accounts of 'traditional people' are intertwined in the history of sociological and anthropological theorizing not just with past societies, but with contemporary ones which are distant from the global power centres. At best there is an oversimplification of subjectivity in accounting not just for our ancestors, but for others in the present 'denied coevalness'; those not quite as technologically, socially,

and culturally 'advanced' as those nations trailblazing the post-industrial present (Fabian, 1983: 31; Argyrou, 2003). At worst it reflects a remarkable degree of cultural superiority and arrogance, claiming that we are the first and only ones to free ourselves from an habitual adherence to the shackles of culture; to finally confront our own selves with perspicuity, whilst our ancestors remained entranced by the veils of tradition.

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[1] The following quote from page one of the programme introduction for the 2005 British Sociological Association conference ('Lifecourse: Fragmentation, Diversity and Risk') indicates the widespread, taken-for-granted nature of these assumptions: 'we are made *increasingly conscious* of the fact that social life is characterised above all by experiences of fragmentation, diversity and risk instead of *the greater certainties of the past*' (emphasis added).

[2] Though a number of scholars have questioned the assertion that contemporary intimacy and family life is as fluid and free of traditions and normative expectations as the detraditionalization thesis suggests (Jamieson, 1998; Smart and Shipman, 2004; Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies, 2003).

[3] The countless expressions of grief and mourning over children who had died contrasts sharply with the 'traditional indifference' mothers are commonly argued to have showed towards their children, supposedly caught up in the collective consciousness of the time to have individualised emotional responses (e.g. Shorter, 1976: 169-175).

[4] Similar claims have been made about the very modern embodiment of masculine identities on the trading floors of San Francisco's Pacific Exchange (Widick, 2003).

[5] Neither is the Victorian period the latest. The attitudes and reflections of pre and war-time Britons in the 1930s, for example, still comes before the post-war starting point commonly associated with detraditionalization. They are captured in some detail by the original Mass-Observations archive (www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs). One scholar of the archive for over twenty years, Tony Kushner, suggested in conversation that even allowing for diary and correspondence formats, the contributors revealed remarkable levels of reflexivity towards the issues of the time such as race and British identity (26/05/05; see also Kushner, 2004).